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Poems from  
Sioux and Chippewa  
Songs

By

FRANCES DENSMORE

Washington, D. C.

1917



To Wm. C. G. Sarneck  
With the author's Compliments

July 9.  
1917  
}

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## INTRODUCTION

Music and poetry are as closely allied in the Indian race as in our own, and the words of many Indian songs are characterized by true poetic thought. A literal translation of these words conveys to us the poetic element, but in such a translation we lose the element of rhythm. In a majority of Indian songs the rhythm is irregular and the native words follow this rhythm, a custom different from our own, in which the music follows the rhythm of the words. The poems herewith offered are the result of an effort to express the poetic concepts of the Sioux and Chippewa songs in their original rhythms.

The songs which form the basis of this work were recorded phonographically in connection with the study of Indian music which for many years the writer has been making under the auspices of the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution at Washington. The inspiration of the poems was a desire to ascertain whether the rhythm of a song is expressive of its idea. This point having been established, there came a desire to test the poetic quality of Indian songs by offering the verses themselves to those who in this manner may consider them apart from the music.

As already indicated, each poem is in the rhythm of a song. In some instances the words are continuous throughout the song, and in these the poem re-

sembles a rhythmic paraphrase of the literal translation; in others the words were so few that it became necessary to elaborate the idea in order that the words should fill the melody, adding such facts or concepts as are known to be associated with the song; while a third class of songs contains no words, and in these instances the poem embodies the statements of Indians concerning the origin or use of the song.

The literal translations are shown for the purpose of comparison. Grateful acknowledgment is made to Mr. Robert Higheagle, a graduate of Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, who translated the Sioux words, and to Mrs. Mary Warren English and Rev. C. H. Beaulieu, members of the Chippewa tribe, who translated the words of the Chippewa songs. These literal translations and the descriptions of songs are used by permission of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

*Francis Densmore*

## No. 1. "Behold"

(Sioux)

This is a ceremonial song of the Sioux Sun dance, the three verses being sung by a leader in the ceremony. The literal translation of the Sioux words is as follows:

"Where holy you behold, in the place where the sun rises, holy may you behold. Where holy you behold; in the place where the sun passes us on his course, holy you behold. Where goodness you behold at the turning back of the sun, goodness may you behold."

To the east turn, O tribe,  
There to behold  
The place where the sun rises,  
Clad in glorious majesty.  
Something holy may you behold  
In this mystery.

To the south turn, O tribe,  
There to behold  
The place where the sun passes us  
In his daily course.  
Something holy may you behold  
In this mystery.

To the west turn, O tribe,  
There to behold  
The place where the sun turns back  
In glorious splendor.  
Goodness may you behold  
In all this mystery.

## No. 2. Song at Sunrise

(Sioux)

This also is a song of the Sun dance and was sung by the leader as the sun rose on the second day of the ceremony.

Literal translation: "Here am I, behold me. I am the sun, behold me."

The rising sun in the east shining,  
Speaketh to us in his glorious splendor,  
"I am the sun; see me in my rising.  
Lo, I am the sun,  
Behold with blinded eyes,  
I am the sun!"

## No. 3. Song of a Medicine-man

(Sioux)

Literal translation: "At night may I roam;  
against the winds may I roam; when the owl is  
hooting may I roam."

In the night may I roam,  
In the night may I roam,  
Afar, afar in the night may I roam.  
Against the wind of morning may I roam,  
In the night may I roam,  
When the owl is heard hooting, hooting,  
May I roam, may I roam.



## No. 4. The Challenge

(Sioux)

This is a personal song of Brave Buffalo, a Sioux medicine-man, who received it in a dream. Because of this dream he believed himself invulnerable and asked the people to shoot their arrows at him as a test. No words were sung, Brave Buffalo saying that "the words were in his heart." The poem embodies, to some extent, the story of the dream, as well as the medicine-man's challenge.

"You cannot harm me,  
You cannot harm  
One who has dreamed a dream like mine,  
One who has seen the buffalo in their mighty  
lodge  
And heard them say,  
'Arrows cannot harm you now!  
We will protect you;  
We will protect  
One who has been in the buffalo lodge,  
One who has seen us,  
One who has looked without fear upon our mys-  
teries,  
Bid them shoot their arrows straight,  
Bid them shoot their arrows straight.'"

## No. 5. My Dream

(Sioux)

This also is a song of Brave Buffalo, who said that he received it in a dream of a buffalo, and by it received power to engage in the practice of medicine.

The literal translation of the words is: " 'I will appear, behold me!' a buffalo said to me."

When I was but a child  
I dreamed a wondrous dream.  
I went upon a mountain;  
There I fell asleep.  
I heard a voice say,  
"Now will I appear to you."  
A buffalo said this to me, dreaming.  
When I was but a child  
I dreamed this wondrous dream.

## No. 6. Night Song of a Medicine-man

(Sioux)

This is a third song of Brave Buffalo, who said he received it in a dream of wolves and used it in treating the sick. It was his custom to sing this song every night.

Literal translation: "Owls (were) hooting in the passing of the night. Owls (were) hooting."

The owls hooting softly, the owls hooting low;  
The owls hooting softly, while dark shadows go;  
The owls hooting softly, the owls hooting low,  
In the passing of the night, the owls hooting low,  
In the gray dawn of morning, the owls hooting low,  
To whom are they calling, I wish I could know.

## No. 7. Song of a Warrior

(Sioux)

This song was sung before the departure of a war-party. A successful warrior had the right to paint his face black, this paint being worn during the dances which followed his return from war.

Literal translation: "Friends, the many lands you fear, in them without fear I have walked. The black face-paint I seek."

O, my friends, as I stand  
Here before you all assembled,  
I hear you sing of the lands where the warriors  
travel.

O, my friends, the many lands that you fear,  
In them all without fear I have walked.

O, my friends, even now  
I can see the distant mountains  
Where the snows never melt in the summer time.  
O, my friends, I have walked without fear in those  
lands,  
For there I sought the black face-paint.

To the west and the north  
Lies the country of the enemy.  
In all those lands I have walked without fear of  
harm.

O, my friends, in them all I have won the right to  
wear  
The warrior's badge of victory.

## No. 8. Old Sioux Love Song

(Sioux)

Concerning love songs it was said among the Sioux that "in the old days all the love songs were associated with a man's qualification to wed, this being determined by his success in war or in the buffalo hunt."

Literal translation of the Sioux words: "You may go on the war-path. When your name I hear (announced among the victors), then I will marry you."

Go thou forth with the warriors,  
Go thou forth to war;  
Go thou forth with the warriors,  
When I hear the Crier shout your name with the  
victors,  
Then, ah then, I will marry you.

I will stay in the village,  
I will sit with the women  
All day making moccasins,  
Listening always for the signal cry that the warriors  
come,  
Then, ah then, I may marry you.

## No. 9. A Warrior to His Horse

(Sioux)

This is the personal song of Lone Man, who received it in a dream and sang it in time of danger, believing it to have supernatural power.

Literal translation: "Friends, my horse, behold it. 'Friends, my horse will run, behold it,' was said to me, Friends, my horse flying (as it were), is running." In this instance the idea is slightly changed, but it expresses a Sioux custom.

My horse be swift in flight  
Even like a bird;  
My horse be swift in flight,  
Bear me now in safety  
Far from the enemy's arrows,  
And you shall be rewarded  
With streamers and ribbons red.

## No. 10. The Warrior's Vow

(Chippewa)

In this instance no words were sung, and the poem presents a war custom. The melody, with whose rhythm the poem conforms, is that of a song which was used in the war dances.

The feast is spread;  
The leader now is telling his men  
Where they will go,  
What enemy tribe they will attack.  
Seated round their leader,  
Hear them respond, "Ho, ah ho, ho, ho!"

The feast is done;  
The warriors stand making their vow  
Not to retreat from where they will see  
A lance in the ground,  
There they must fight or fall.  
Hear them respond, "Ho, ah ho, ho, ho!"

In distant lands  
The warriors brave enter the fray;  
Thick fly the arrows, while overhead  
Shineth the lance,  
But at its foot how many  
Warriors lie—dead beside the lance.

## No. 11

(Chippewa)

When a Chippewa war-party left the village, the women walked before the warriors, all singing this song. After going some distance, the women divided and stood in two lines, between which the warriors passed on their way. The women then returned to the village still singing the song.

Literal translation: "Come, it is time for you to depart. We are going on a long journey."

Fare thee well. The time is come  
For our sad departing,  
We who take the road to war  
Travel on a long journey.

Fare thee well. The warrior's eyes  
Must not look beside him;  
In departing he must see  
Only the camp-fires of the enemy.

Fare thee well. We go to fight  
For the tribe's protection,  
Yet we know the road to war  
Ever is a long journey.



## No. 12. To the Buffalo

(Chippewa)

This is a dance song, accompanying the use of the Buffalo Medicine, which was supposed to strengthen the warriors.

Literal translation: "Strike ye our land with curved horns."

Strike ye now our land with your great curvéd  
horns;

In your mighty rage toss the turf in the air.

Strike ye now our land with your great curvéd  
horns;

We will hear the sound and our hearts will be  
strong.

When we go to war,

Give us of your strength in the time of our need,

King of all the plain—buffalo, buffalo.

Strike ye now our land with your great curvéd  
horns;

Lead us forth to the fight.

## No. 13. The Thunderbirds

(Chippewa)

The following song was used in the treatment of the sick. It seems probable that the man who originally used it was one who received it in a dream of the thunderbirds.

Literal translation: "The sound approaches, the (thunder)birds ~~draw~~ draw near."

Hear the loud sound!

The thunderbirds draw near us, in their mighty  
power.

Hark their voices!

The lightning flash is the gleaming ~~of~~ of their terrible  
eyes;

The roll in the storm-swept sky  
Is the noise of the thunderbird's wings.

No. 14. "In Her Canoe"

(Chippewa)

Literal translation: "I see her, my sweetheart,  
paddling her canoe."

In her canoe I see her,  
Maiden of my delighted eyes.  
I see in the rippling of the water  
The trailing light slipped from her paddle blade.  
A signal sent to me.  
Ah, maiden of my desire,  
Give me a place in thy canoe;  
Give me the paddle blade,  
And you shall steer us away  
Wherever you would go!

## No. 15. Love Song

(Chippewa)

This song was recorded in western Minnesota, but was said to have been brought by the Chippewa from La Pointe, Wisconsin, a generation ago.

Literal translation: "To a very distant land he is going, my lover; soon he will come again."

All my heart is lonely,  
All my heart is full of sorrow.  
My lover, my lover is departed.

Dark the sky at evening,  
Sad the bird-notes in the dawning.  
My lover, my lover is departed.

He was all my sunshine,  
His the beauty and the gladness.  
Return, return, gladness and joy.

## No. 16. Do Not Weep

(Chippewa)

Literal translation: "Do not weep, I am not going to die."

I am not going to die;  
I am not going to die;  
I am not willing to die.  
Ah, do not weep, beloved, for me.

It is for you that I live;  
It is for you that I live;  
Hold me once more in your arms.  
Death could not take your lover from you.

## No. 17. Longing

(Chippewa)

Literal translation: "Although he said it, still I am filled with longing when I think of him."

It is true that he is gone away;  
It is true he spoke those bitter words;  
Yet for these, for these I do not mourn.  
All my heart is filled with loneliness and pain  
In the fear he will not come again.  
Although he said it, still I long for him,  
And still I wait for him.

## No. 18. Song of the Crows

(Chippewa)

It is said that this song was heard by a young man in a fasting vision. Because of this experience he was able to understand the language of the crows.

Literal translation: "The first to come I am called among the birds. I bring the rain. Crow is my name."

I am first to come in early spring,  
'Tis I who bring the rain,  
First of all the birds,  
And I am called the crow.

You may hear my call across the field  
And know that spring is near.  
I will bring the rain,  
For I am called the crow.

## No. 19. Song of an Ambitious Mother

(Chippewa)

This is the song of a mother who asks that the chief's daughter be permitted to marry her son. A brass kettle was among the most valued possessions of a Chippewa woman in the early days, yet the words imply that her son, and not herself, will bestow this kettle upon the prospective bride.

Literal translation: "I am asking for Bugac's daughter. My big brass kettle he is giving." (Bugac is the name of a chief.)

This I have come to ask you,  
This I have come to ask you—  
O, let your daughter  
Marry my son, the hunter,  
And he'll give your daughter  
My big brass kettle.

## No. 20. The Child in the Dark

(Chippewa)

The man who recorded this song said that when he was a child his mother once left him alone in the wigwam at night. He became very much afraid that he would hear an owl, which is the particular terror of small Chippewa children, so he composed this little song and sang it. The people in nearby wigwams heard him singing, and learned the song, which afterward became popular in the village.

Literal translation: "Very much also I of the owl am afraid, whenever I am sitting alone in the wigwam."

Very much do I fear  
That the owl I may hear  
When I sit all alone in the wigwam.  
Very much do I fear  
That the owl I may hear in the dark.



## No. 21. Lullaby

(Chippewa)

The Chippewa women use no words with this song repeating over and over the soothing syllables "Way, way, way."

Little baby, sleep,  
Mother swings your hammock low;  
Little birds are asleep in their nest.

Way, way, way, way, way,  
Way, way, way, way, way, way, way.  
Little baby with nothing to fear.





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